

## Amnesty International

### Solidarity Action for Universal Rights

# China

#### Stop the repression of workers' rights

(Pic)

#### **Li Bifeng**

Li Bifeng is serving a seven year prison sentence for daring to publicise the struggle of Chinese workers.

#### **Corruption**

In July 1997 the failure of three state-owned silk and textile factories and allegations of corrupt party cadres misappropriating unemployment funds in Mianyang, and other cities in the south-western Chinese province of Sichuan, sparked strikes and massive demonstrations by local workers protesting against corruption and appealing to the government to protect at least a subsistence standard of living for workers.

#### **Injuries and detentions**

The authorities, who claimed that only a few hundred people took part in the demonstrations, were quick to react. Armed military police moved in leading to clashes in which it was reported that more than one hundred workers were injured and many detained. Hospital workers were apparently ordered not to treat the wounded demonstrators.

#### **Prison after pro-democracy demonstrations**

Li Bifeng was a civil service worker in the Mianyang tax office until the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989 in which he took part, and after which he spent five years in prison for 'spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda'. Also a poet, 34 year old Li acted as a spokesperson for an unofficial Christian group he helped to found which investigated the problems and living conditions of laid-off workers in Sichuan.

#### **Call for international support**

Li publicized the protests in Mianyang and elsewhere and denounced the repression of them in an open letter to the Chinese Authorities. Li also asked International trade union organisations to intervene on behalf of the detained workers and those injured in clashes with the security forces.

Fearing that he would be arrested for his actions Li went into hiding and spent eight months on the run.

#### **Right to Organise**

Even while on the run early last year, Li managed to organise an opinion poll of twenty thousand workers who had been made redundant under the economic reforms. Li publicised the results of his survey which showed that 98% of the workers who responded felt that decisions on their redundancies had not been made on an 'equitable' basis and agreed with demands that the government 'reform the economic system in order to install a mechanism for social security'. Li again issued appeals to the international labour movement for support for workers protests in China and for the right of Chinese workers to organise.

Li's fears of arrest were well founded, while he was in hiding his girlfriend Zhang Jiang was detained by police on several occasions and questioned about his whereabouts. This included 15 days detention

in September 1997 without being charged. The police harassment she suffered reportedly led to her having to close the restaurant she ran.

On 8 March 1998 while on his way to visit his two-year old daughter and other family, Li Bifeng was taken from a taxi at a toll-booth. The police, who showed no identification when they detained Li, initially refused to provide his family with any information on what had happened or where he was.

Li was formally arrested on 6 April, he was charged with fraud, apparently relating to the sale of a safe deposit box from where he worked. Fraud however is a charge sometimes used in cases against dissidents.

### **Trial without witnesses**

In August Li was sentenced to seven years imprisonment after a trial that lasted only for one day. According to reports the court was unable to find a single witness willing to testify against Li and his lawyer was warned against making a proper defence case.

### **Prisoner of conscience**

Amnesty International considers Li Bifeng to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for the non-violent expression of his beliefs in publicising the plight of workers in Sichuan province.

### **Defending human rights**

Li Bifeng is one of many workers rights campaigners and other activists struggling to defend basic human rights detained in China. Like Li such human rights defenders may risk their jobs, contact with their families and their freedom because they are prepared to stand up for the rights of others.

### **Working Life in China**

#### **Compulsory, unpaid overtime**

Organisations, outside China, working on behalf of Chinese workers report serious and widespread problems faced by workers in China which violate international standards and even China's domestic labour law. Appalling health and safety conditions in factories frequently lead to serious injuries and deaths. Overtime, often unpaid, is frequently compulsory. It is common for workers to be owed pay. Factory employees may be forbidden from getting married.

#### **Harsh rules and penalties**

Workers may not have freedom of movement in and out of the factory compound even after work hours, can be forbidden to talk during work hours or even while eating, and may be fined for going to the toilet too often. Penalties for violating these regulations include dismissal, fines, and even physical ill-treatment. As elsewhere, migrant workers can be particularly vulnerable to abuse.

#### **Income gap widens**

China's economy has expanded massively in recent decades, and is undergoing a transformation into a privately owned 'market economy' as China seeks to further involve itself in the global economy and to gain admission to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). At the same time, the income gap between the richest and poorest in China is rapidly widening and now economic expansion is slowing.

#### **Attracting investors/ no independent unions**

In an effort to attract foreign investment and to reassure investors China is concentrating on reforming those parts of its legal system that relate to trade and contract law. It fails to notice that a parallel reform of its laws that restrict the civil, political and social rights of its people is also necessary. Although the economy is becoming open to individual entrepreneurs and foreign business, China is failing to open up other sectors of society by not allowing the freedom to create independent trade unions and human rights watchdogs.

### **Unemployment and unrest**

In the state sector many companies have failed and millions of workers have been laid off. The state has failed to provide the social welfare needed by the unemployed. This has led to many demonstrations, sometimes involving thousands of workers, protesting the lack of social benefits and official corruption. Worker unrest is one of the greatest fears of the Chinese Government, still haunted by the international outrage that followed their crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations centred around Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

### **No freedom to organise**

With no independent representation and no freedom to organise and express opinions, workers are unable to take part in discussions about the measures needed to protect their jobs, their salaries or provide safety nets should they be made redundant.

### **Trade Unions Rights in China**

In October 1997 China signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which guarantees 'The right of everyone to form trade unions and join the trade union of his choice'. The right to form and join trade unions is also included in the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR) which China signed last year.

Independent trade unions however are illegal in China. The official union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions, is strictly controlled by the ruling communist party which appoints key union officials. The right to strike, also enshrined in the ICESCR, was removed from the Chinese constitution in 1992 on the grounds that the political system had 'eradicated problems between the proletariat and enterprise owners.'

### **Labour camps**

Activists in China who attempt to organise independent labour action continue to be subjected to detention and imprisonment including having to face 're-education through labour' in labour camps. Once in prison labour activists, like other political prisoners, are sometimes singled out for particularly harsh treatment including beatings and the denial of medical care.

### **Globalisation**

As China seeks to join the global economy and engage with international economic organisations, these organisations & potential investors need to be persuaded that there can be no real security for foreign investors or domestic employers until there is freedom from repression for everyone in China.

## TAKE ACTION

- **Individuals and organisations can write to the Chinese authorities to call for the immediate and unconditional release of Li Bifeng.**

Write to:

President of the People's republic of China

**JIANG Zemin** Guojia Zhuxi

Beijingshi

People's Republic of China

(Salutation: Your Excellency)

Minister of Labour and Social Security of the People's Republic of China

**ZHANG Zuoji** Buzhang

Laodongbu

12 Hepingli Zhong Jie

Dongchengqu

Beijingshi

People's Republic of China

(Salutation: Your Excellency)

Governor of the Sichuan Provincial People's Government

**SONG Baorui** Shengzhang

Sichuansheng Renmin Zhengfu

Duyuanlu

Chengdushi 610016

Sichuansheng

People's Republic of China

(Salutation: Dear Governor)

Send a copy of your letter to the Chinese embassy or consulate in your country.

Please pass copies of any replies you receive from Chinese authorities to:

The East Asia Team, Amnesty International, International Secretariat, London, WC1X 8DJ, United Kingdom.

- **Join Amnesty International in working to protect trade union activists and other human rights defenders around the world.**

Contact your National Section of Amnesty International to find out more.